

Social Audit Silent but successful initiative

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The Andhra Pradesh government, quietly and unobtrusively, has achieved something quite remarkable: the conduct of the social audit for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) using the RTI Act; and thereby sown the seeds for a non-violent revolution in less than two years.

The government does not conduct the audit; rather, it facilitates it, but does so comprehensively and with an eye for detail. One round has been completed in all gram panchayats and the second round is in progress. There has been a tremendous impact because the government has taken on the responsibility; it has also gained credibility because of its transparency and is not seen as a stage-managed process.

At Kollampalli village, Thimmapur mandal, Karimnagar district, this was the first social audit in the village and all the works during 2006-07, 2007-08 and part of 2008-09 were verified. Kollampalli is a large village and had utilised almost Rs 1 crore for works like desilting of irrigation tanks, construction of tanks, excavation of field channels, horticulture plantations, land development and irrigation wells on holdings of Scheduled Caste and other poor small farmers. Six village social auditors — all from agricultural labour families from the neighbouring villages — were trained for the social audit. All were young — four girls and two boys studying in college — selected by the DRP who also trained them.

The village sarpanch had a stranglehold and was also alleged to be in league with the MPDO to misappropriate funds. Many of his supporters checked the social audit team's work and also tried to question them. But they did not obstruct the work nor did they try to disrupt the ward sabha meeting; for this exercise had the full support of government.

At one ward sabha meeting of about 100 people, the majority being women who had worked under the scheme, the audience participated actively and often vigorously particularly when they discovered that the records showed wrong names and amounts. At the mandal meeting the zilla parishad chairman from Karimnagar and other district officers were also present. About Rs. 20,000 was returned by the Field Assistants and the Mates. Commitments and deadlines to pay back other amounts misappropriated were also made public. When misappropriation by the sarpanch was discussed, the zilla parishad chairman insisted not only on the return of the amount but also on a criminal case being filed against him! Political support could not have been expressed in clearer terms.

At the Mallapally mandal meeting, about 1,500 people from 20 gram panchayats participated. The results of the social audit for each Gram Panchayat were read out in turn. This included not only discrepancies and irregularities but also the good work. The discussions were free, unrestrained, transparent and very animated.

For one village, several people maintained that they had been paid only half the minimum wage. The Field Assistant agreed to this but said that only half the work was completed, and since wages were calculated after measurement of the work done, the payments were correct. But the women

insisted that they had worked all day and should have been paid the full wage. The Project Director (PD), therefore, directed the MPDO to visit the village along with the engineer within three days to check the muster roll and verify the names. This would be reviewed at the follow up meeting. The villagers were satisfied with this assurance. Thimmapur mandal had been selected as a pilot project for the payment of wages through Smart Cards, which work like ATM cards and are given to each person registered under the NREGS. The concerned bank at the mandal headquarters appoints an agent to make payment for each village under the scheme.

The most encouraging aspect is that it is all actually beginning to happen! Not perfectly, not painlessly and still evolving, but unmistakably so. An interesting feature is that the politicians have supported it, often vigorously. They have seen in this process an opportunity to enhance their own standing in a credible public forum. The second round has shown less corruption, better quality of work and more effective supervision.

None of this would have happened without the information received under the RTI Act; and that would not have come without government directives. It is time other states adopted a similar approach. (Excerpts, *The Hindu*, March 1, 2009)

□ The writer is a former Director General of the National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad

SELECT READING

Karl-Oskar Lindgren, Magdalena Inkinen, Sten Widmalm: *Who Knows Best What the People Want: Women or Men? A Study of Political Representation in India*, Comparative Political Studies, Vol. 42, No. 1

K. C. Sivaramakrishnan: *Courts, Panchayats and Nagarpalikas: Background and Review of the Case Law*; Academic Foundation, New Delhi

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